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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated the attitudes and experiences that distinguish the low-income high school students who decide to attend college from those who do not. Data were gathered in a telephone survey of 900 seniors in the class of 1995 who took the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT); the primary sample was 300 of those students who reported family incomes under $20,000. Data included student characteristics (gender, race, native language), family income, parents' educational level, parents' occupations, SAT scores, post-high school plans, sources of college and financing information, academic self-confidence (in mathematics, science, writing), degree aspiration, influences in college decision-making, preferred college attributes, college preparation, sources of and plans for financing college, and college acceptances. Results are reported in narrative and tabular form. The study found that rigorous high school courses, high expectations of all students, and availability of college counseling and information were important elements in the decision to go to college. Many of the attitudes and educational experiences associated with four-year college attendance were not common to the low-income students. (MSE)

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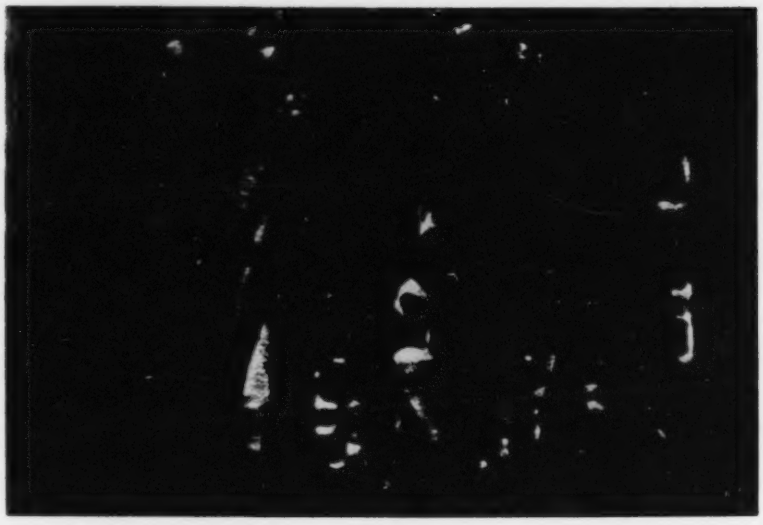
The Decision to Go to College



Attitudes and Experiences Associated with College Attendance Among Low-Income Students

Results of a College Board/ Gallup International Institute Survey of SAT® Seniors

Jacqueline E. King

1998

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Many people at the College Board and the Gallup International Institute were responsible for bringing this project to fruition. At the College Board, this undertaking was a joint effort of the Office for Research, Development, and Evaluation and the Washington Office's policy analysis staff. The project was funded by the Office for Research, Development, and Evaluation. Special thanks are due to Howard Everson, senior research scientist, for agreeing to support the project, and to Wayne Camara, associate research scientist, who helped to formulate the overall design of the project, handled much of the necessary logistics, and reviewed drafts of the Gallup interview protocol.

Lawrence Gladieux, executive director for policy analysis, fostered the College Board's partnership with the Gallup International Institute, helped to design the project, and provided advice and assistance at each stage of the research effort. Jacqueline King, assistant director for policy analysis, managed the project for the College Board, analyzed the data, and wrote this report. Vincent Graves, senior administrative assistant, and Roberta Merchant-Stoutamire, administrative associate, provided editorial advice and production assistance.

Christine Babick and Erin Thomas supervised the production of this report; Antonia Goldmark designed it.

At the Gallup International Institute, Wyn Manning proposed the initial meetings that led to this joint effort and provided editorial and technical advice. Corinne Kyle managed the project at Gallup; she wrote the interview protocol, supervised the necessary logistics, and wrote a report on the Gallup interview portion of the project.

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PREFACE

The College Board collects a good deal of information from students, on a voluntary basis, when they register for College Board tests. The Gallup International Institute has extensive capabilities in questionnaire design and survey research. A year ago these two organizations decided to collaborate on an analysis of what influences young people to decide to go to college.

We wanted to focus particularly on low-income students, whose college participation rates remain disproportionately low. Which academic variables and what types of intervention are likely to help in overcoming barriers for disadvantaged students?

The College Board/Gallup partnership resulted in a sample survey of 1995 high school seniors who took the SAT. While the SAT population is not representative of all who go on to some form of postsecondary education, it is a key reference group for understanding the characteristics and plans of those who have taken an important step toward eventual attainment of a bachelor's degree. We hope the findings summarized here are useful to education researchers, reformers, counselors, teachers and all who might influence students in making their post-high school choices.

Over the past five years the College Board has conducted a pilot school reform program, EQUITY 2000, designed to close the gaps in college-going rates between minority and nonminority, economically advantaged and disadvantaged students in six urban school sites across the country. The results of EQUITY 2000 so far are encouraging.

The College Board/Gallup survey findings reinforce much of what we have learned through EQUITY 2000, above all:

- the importance of rigorous courses and high expectations of all students, and
- the strategic role of college counseling and information.

The survey particularly underscores the importance, for low-income students, of counseling resources in the schools. Middle-class students may have other places to turn for this kind of support. But for the disadvantaged, the function of school-based counseling seems to be more pivotal.

None of this amounts to rocket science. We simply need more advocacy for school reforms that combine these key ingredients: high expectations and sustained guidance. We hope this survey helps to spotlight this need and encourage the necessary response in middle and secondary schools.

The College Board plans to repeat this survey and welcomes comments and suggestions from readers.

Lawrence Gladieux
Executive Director for Policy Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Improving the college participation rates of low-income students has been a preoccupation of educators and policymakers since the 1960s. One indicator of how income affects college attendance is the small proportion of low-income students among the more than one million high school seniors who take the College Board's SAT each year. Approximately 15 percent of seniors in the class of 1995 who took the SAT identified themselves as having family incomes of $20,000 or less. In this small group, only 66 percent report plans to attend a four-year college or university, versus the 80 to 85 percent of middle-and upper-income seniors who took the SAT.

What distinguishes those low-income SAT takers who plan to attend a four-year college? This report identifies attitudes and experiences that may have influenced these young people. The study weighs the importance of a wide array of factors, including parental support and encouragement, personal aspirations, guidance and counseling, and completion of college preparatory courses in high school.

Why Four-Year Colleges?

Because of the unique nature of the SAT senior population, the College Board chose to focus on four-year college attendance in this study. Students do not take the SAT without some interest in attending a four-year institution, since most community colleges do not require an entrance examination. This report identifies factors that may have helped students to follow through on the aspirations that prompted them to take the SAT.

STUDY DESIGN

To help understand these dynamics, the College Board commissioned The George H. Gallup International Institute, a nonprofit research and education survey organization, to conduct a telephone survey of 900 high school seniors in the class of 1995. These students took the SAT and answered a question about family income on the Student Descriptive Questionnaire (SDQ), a paper-and-pencil survey completed when students register for the SAT. The data for this report include students' responses to the Gallup telephone interview, conducted in June 1995, as well as information from the SDQ and SAT scores.

To achieve adequate representation of students across the income and achievement spectrums, the 900 students were selected randomly for the interview according to their family income and combined SAT verbal and math scores. Three hundred of these students reported family incomes of $20,000 or less, placing them in the lowest quartile nationally and, presumably, making most of them eligible for a federal Pell Grant and other need-based student aid. These students are the primary subjects of this study. In addition, the report presents information comparing these low-income students with the entire sample of 900 SAT seniors.

TABLE ONE

	All SAT Takers Surveyed	Low-Income SAT Takers
Gender		
- Male	44.6%	39.9%
- Female	55.4	60.1
Race/Ethnicity		
- American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.2	.7
- African American	9.6	21.4
- Asian American	9.0	15.9
- Hispanic	9.8	19.3
- White	67.5	37.6
- Other/No Response	2.9	6.7
Native Language		
- English	83.6	58.7
- English and Another Language	9.0	15.4
- Another Language	7.4	25.8
Family Income		
- Less than $20,000	15.5	100.0
- $20,000 to $35,000	22.3	
- $35,000 to $70,000	37.3	
- Over $70,000	24.9	
Parents' Highest Education Level		
- High School Diploma or Less	5.6	22.1
- Some College	15.1	20.1
- Bachelor's Degree	49.6	49.3
- Some Graduate or Graduate Degree	29.7	8.5
Parents' Occupation		
- Unskilled Labor/Service	11.2	30.2
- Skilled Labor	12.8	15.3
- Management/Technical	41.4	34.7
- Professional	34.5	19.8
Combined SAT Verbal and Math Score	921	789
Grade-Point Average	3.3	3.1
Years of Study in Six Academic Subjects	19.0	17.9
Post-High School Plans		
- Attend a Four-Year College or University	78.5	66.3
- Attend a Community College	15.1	23.5
- Other	6.5	10.2

Note: The data presented here and throughout this report are weighted by the income and SAT score distribution of all students in the 1995 SAT seniors population to reflect students' actual characteristics with respect to these variables. SAT scores are not recentered.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LOW-INCOME SAT TAKERS

The statistics in Table One reveal that low-income students who take the SAT are more likely to be female, are more racially and ethnically diverse, and are more likely to be bilingual than the entire population of SAT seniors. As one would expect given their family incomes, these students' parents have lower educational attainment and are more likely to hold low-paying and low-status jobs. Academically, low-income students score, on average, more than 130 points lower than the entire sample on the SAT, have slightly lower grades, and have taken an average of one year less course work in six academic subjects. Most important for this study, low-income SAT seniors are more likely than their peers to choose an option other than attending a four-year college or university. Only 66 percent of low-income SAT takers plan to attend a four-year college, compared to almost 80 percent of the entire sample (see note).

How Were Factors Chosen for Inclusion in this Report?

As noted, 66 percent of low-income SAT takers plan to attend a four-year college or university. This report identifies attitudes and experiences associated with college attendance rates of **70 percent or better.** Low-income students who have these characteristics are more likely to attend a four-year college than are low-income SAT takers as a group.

ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES

What factors are associated with higher than average four-year college attendance among low-income students? To answer this question, the College Board evaluated students' responses to questions about their backgrounds, the guidance and support they receive from family and peers, their educational aspirations and academic self-confidence, the courses they took in high school along with their achievement in those courses and on the SAT, and the college information, counseling, and preparatory activities to which they were exposed during high school.

Background. Although college attendance rates among the broad population of high school seniors vary widely by gender, race and ethnicity, native language, and parents' education, these factors are not associated with significant differences in college plans among low-income students who take the SAT. However, low-income students whose parents hold professional positions are more likely at 75 percent to attend a four-year college than the 66 percent average. These students' parents may work in low-paying professions, such as the clergy or social work, or it is possible that these students may have underestimated their parents' income and may actually not be low-income.*

Note: Because respondents were interviewed late in their senior year of high school, one can assume that most will follow through on their college plans the following fall. However, previous research has found a significant disparity between low-income and minority students' aspirations and their actual college enrollment.

Family and Peer Support. Low-income students who received college information from friends and/or parents and who count their parents as one of the sources of funds they will use to finance their education are more likely than the 66 percent average to plan to attend a four-year college. Conversely, the 20 percent of low-income SAT takers who either do not have a father or who don't know whether or not their father is pleased with their plans are less likely than average to attend a four-year college.

TABLE TWO

	Planning to Attend a Four-Year College
Parents a Source of College Information	76.8%
Friends a Source of College Information	74.4
Parents a Source of College Financing	75.9
No Father	56.3
Father's Opinion on Plans Unknown	58.3

Academic Self-Confidence and Personal Aspirations. High academic self-confidence, especially in math and science, is associated with much higher than average rates of four-year college attendance. Not only do more low-income students who rate themselves among the top 10 percent of their peers in math and science plan to attend a four-year college than others in the same income group, their rate of college attendance is at or above the average for all SAT takers, regardless of income. In addition, students who hold high academic aspirations and career goals plan to attend four-year colleges at higher rates than the average for all low-income SAT takers.

TABLE THREE

	Planning to Attend a Four-Year College
Math Self-Confidence	
- Top 10 Percent	78.6%
- Above Average	71.4
Science Self-Confidence	
- Top 10 Percent	85.7
- Above Average	73.9
Writing Self-Confidence	
- Top 10 Percent	75.0
- Above Average	70.0
Degree Aspiration	
- Doctorate/First Professional	79.3
- Master's	72.5
Career Goal: Professional Occupation	71.1

Course Work and Academic Achievement. Low-income SAT takers who complete four years of high school course work in math, science, or foreign language are more likely than average to attend a four-year college. More specifically, students who take a year or more of trigonometry, calculus, chemistry, or physics attend college at higher rates than low-income students as a group. Similarly, students who take even one or two Advanced Placement (AP) courses also attend four-year colleges at higher than average rates. Overall, students who complete a total of 18 years or more of high school course work in six subjects (English, math, foreign language, art or music, social science, and physical/life science) are more likely than average to attend college.

Not surprisingly, students with "A" grades are more likely to attend college. Low-income students who score either in the middle 50 percent or in the upper quartile of all SAT takers nationally also attend college at a higher rate than low-income students as a group. This is noteworthy because some low-income students in the middle 50 percent score below the mean for all SAT seniors. Low-income students and parents may believe that only the brightest students can attend college; these data imply that low-income students who attend four-year colleges do not necessarily have to be academic "superstars."

These findings on course work and achievement, together with the results on academic self-confidence and personal aspirations, appear to bolster the notion that low-income students who are challenged by difficult courses not only rise to the challenge but also develop greater confidence and higher aspirations as a result.

TABLE FOUR

	Planning to Attend a Four-Year College
Four Years of Course Work	
- Foreign Language	74.0%
- Math	70.1
- Science	76.0
At Least One Year of Course Work	
- Trigonometry	72.2
- Calculus	80.6
- Chemistry	71.5
- Physics	73.3
One or Two Years of AP Course Work	74.3
Eighteen or More Years in Six Subjects	74.2
Academic Achievement	
- "A" Grade-Point Average	81.6
- 750–1060 SAT Verbal plus Math	74.2
- 1070–1600 SAT Verbal plus Math	87.9

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College Information, Financing, and Preparation. Overall, low-income students were more likely than average to attend a four-year college if they frequently saw a school counselor who recommended they attend a four-year college, took the PSAT, got information on colleges and financial aid directly from postsecondary institutions, or planned to finance their education in part through merit or need-based grants.

Several results stand out. First, the role of the school counselor is clearly pivotal. Students who saw a school counselor several times a year during their junior and senior years to discuss their future were more likely than average to attend a four-year college. Further, students were very likely to follow their counselor's recommendation. Almost 90 percent of low-income SAT takers whose counselors recommended they attend a four-year college or university reported plans to do just that. Finally, students who took the PSAT, something many low-income students might not do if not prompted by a teacher or counselor, were more likely than average to attend a four-year college.

Second, low-income students who received information about colleges and financial aid directly from admission and financial aid offices were more likely than average to attend a four-year college or university. Receiving information from other sources, such as guidebooks, catalogs, and videos, was not associated with increased college attendance.

Finally, low-income students who anticipated receiving some type of grant assistance were more likely than average to attend a four-year college or university. Contrary to the common concern that low-income students may choose to forgo higher education or to attend community colleges to avoid borrowing, low-income SAT takers who plan to borrow are no less likely to attend a four-year college than those who do not plan to rely on student loans.

TABLE FIVE

	Planning to Attend a Four-Year College
Counseling	
- Took the PSAT	73.0%
- Met with Counselor Several Times	70.4
- Recommended Four-Year College	88.5
Admission/Financial Aid Office	
- Admission Office Very Helpful	77.4
- Financial Aid Info from Admission Office	73.8
- Aid Info from Financial Aid Office	70.7
College Financing Sources	
- Merit Scholarships	80.1
- Need-Based Grants	77.7

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

This report offers no "magic pill" that will automatically spur low-income students to attend four-year colleges and universities. Indeed, some might shrug off much of what is presented here as common sense. Of course students who earn high grades in high school are more likely to attend college than those who do not achieve so highly!

At the same time, many of the attitudes and educational experiences associated with four-year college attendance are not typical for many low-income students. Indeed, exposing all students to rigorous college preparatory courses in high school and encouraging them to aspire to higher education has only lately come to be commonly viewed as good educational practice. This report provides evidence that low-income students who have high educational and career aspirations, have taken rigorous courses, and are confident of their academic abilities are likely to plan to attend a four-year college. At least to some extent, the low-income students Gallup interviewed plan to attend a four-year college because they believe they are well prepared academically and are confident they can succeed.

This report also highlights the important influence of college counseling and information on students' preparation for college — a theme seldom mentioned in calls for education reform. *Eighty-five percent of low-income SAT takers saw a school counselor at least two or three times during their junior and senior years to discuss their future plans.* Given the low number of school counselors in many public schools, this is an astounding figure. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are over 500 students for every one school counselor in the nation's public schools. Further, of the over 4.7 million individuals employed in public schools nationwide, less than 2 percent are school counselors. It seems likely that many low-income students are unable to see a school counselor to discuss their future as often as low-income SAT takers in this study report. It is not unreasonable to suggest that access to adequate college counseling in high school is a substantial influence on low-income SAT takers who plan to go on to a four-year college or university.

The best outcome of the College Board's research efforts with the Gallup International Institute would be to encourage educators to use this information to leverage support in their states and school districts for rigorous academic preparation for all students, and to ask for the resources necessary to mount comprehensive programs of college information and counseling. Such commonsense educational practices — in combination with parental support, strong recruiting efforts by colleges and universities, and adequate student financial aid — could go a long way toward increasing the college attendance rates of low-income students.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE COLLEGE DECISION

The tables below provide additional information from the SDQ and the interviews conducted by Gallup on all students surveyed and low-income SAT takers, including:

- students' post-high school plans;
- people who were very helpful to them as they formulated their plans;
- number of times they met with a school counselor as juniors and seniors to discuss their plans;
- sources of college and financial aid information they used most commonly;
- college attributes students found very important when choosing among institutions;
- indicators of their academic preparation for college;
- sources they plan to tap to finance their college education;
- percentage of their college costs they expect student aid to pay; and
- number of college applications they submitted and acceptances they received.

Planned Post-High School Activity	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Attend a Public Four-Year College or University	52.9%	47.3%
Attend a Private Four-Year College or University	25.6	18.9
Attend a Junior or Community College	15.1	23.5
Attend a Vocational or Technical School	2.2	2.0
Work, Join the Military, or Travel	4.3	8.2

People SAT Takers Found Helpful When Making Their Post-High School Plans	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Parents	82.5%	70.0%
School Counselor	50.9	58.0
Teacher	41.8	52.5
Friends	27.1	37.1
Sibling	24.5	29.4
Admission Officer	18.4	22.3
Youth Leader	12.9	20.0
Admission Consultant	12.1	13.7

Note: Respondents were able to designate more than one person and more than one college attribute as "very helpful" or "very important." Similarly, they were asked to indicate whether or not they used each of the information and financing sources listed.

Discussed Plans with a Counselor as Juniors and Seniors	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
About Once a Month	14.7%	13.5%
Several Times During Each Year	42.1	45.5
Two or Three Times	31.7	26.3
Only Once	5.4	6.7
Never	6.1	8.1

Counselors' Recommended Post-High School Activity	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Attend a Four-Year College or University	74.7%	71.6%
Attend a Community College/Vocational School	13.6	19.8
Work, Join the Military, or Travel	3.2	4.3
Didn't Make a Recommendation	8.4	4.3

Commonly Used Information Sources	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
College Information		
- Catalogs	88.0%	82.6%
- Family	87.6	78.1
- Friends	84.0	82.5
- Campus Visits	74.8	70.2
- School Counselor	74.4	75.3
- Fairs	65.9	65.1
- Guidebooks	59.6	62.5
Financial Aid Information		
- Parents	87.1	76.6
- School Counselor	71.9	73.2
- Financial Aid Office	67.7	75.6
- Admission Office	66.2	64.1
- Guidebooks	66.1	67.0
- Friends	52.7	54.0
- Teachers	37.5	45.2

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College Attributes SAT Takers Considered Very Important	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Academic Program	81.3%	84.7%
Academic Reputation	69.9	69.1
Cost of Attendance	54.5	59.9
Offer of Financial Aid	51.6	66.7
Social Atmosphere	45.1	46.0
Type of Community	44.0	41.0
Size of Student Body	21.8	24.6
Control (Public or Private)	19.4	27.3
Able to Live at Home	19.2	29.8

Academic Preparation for College	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Took the PSAT	82.2%	68.8%
Years of Course Work in Six Academic Subjects		
- Less than 15	9.3	15.5
- 15.5 to 17	16.7	26.6
- 17.5 to 19	26.7	25.9
- 19.5 to 21	30.7	23.7
- Over 21	16.6	8.3
Advanced Course Work		
- Trigonometry	38.4	32.8
- Calculus	22.1	12.9
- Chemistry	85.1	74.8
- Physics	47.7	35.9

Sources SAT Takers Plan to Use to Finance Their College Education	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Family	90.7%	76.5%
College Job	75.4	77.9
High School Job	72.4	70.5
Loan	58.5	58.7
Merit Scholarship	54.3	58.2
Need-Based Grant	45.2	67.2
AP/Credit by Exam	32.6	33.9

Percentage of College Costs SAT Takers Anticipate Student Aid Will Pay	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
More than 75 Percent	8.6%	16.0%
50 to 75 Percent	23.7	33.6
25 to 50 Percent	19.7	17.6
Less than 25 Percent	19.3	5.9
None/Don't Know	28.8	26.9

SAT Takers Who Applied to College and Number of Applications	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Applied to College (Two- or Four-Year Institutions)	93.4%	87.7%
Number of Applications		
- One	27.9	31.1
- Two	19.5	21.6
- Three	17.8	17.1
- Four	13.7	14.9
- Five or More	21.1	15.3
Average Number of Applications	3.08	2.83

SAT Takers Who Were Accepted to College and Number of Acceptances	All SAT Takers	Low-Income SAT Takers
Accepted to College (of those who applied)	95.9%	90.5%
Number of Acceptances		
- One	37.4	43.7
- Two	21.9	27.5
- Three	17.4	12.6
- Four	10.6	8.8
- Five or More	12.6	7.4
Average Number of Acceptances	2.53	2.18

FOR MORE INFORMATION

A compendium of data from the 1995 College Board/Gallup survey of SAT seniors is available for $6.00 from the College Board, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Suite 404, Washington, D.C. 20036. Please make your check payable to the College Board.

In addition, a College Board Research Report, based on data collected through this project, will be available in the fall of 1996. "Improving the Odds: Factors that Increase the Likelihood of Four-Year College Attendance Among High School Seniors" will detail the results of multivariate analysis on factors that predict four-year college attendance among all SAT takers.

If you have questions about this report or have a special request for information, please contact Jacqueline King at the College Board (202-332-7134; jeking@collegeboard.org). The College Board plans to repeat this survey and welcomes your comments and suggestions for improvements and additions.

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